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# CHINESE PERCEPTIONS OF AMERICAN POWER, 1991–2004

\_\_\_\_\_ Biwu Zhang  
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## Abstract

This article presents Chinese perceptions of American power/capability in terms of economic, scientific and technological, military, and soft power, together with its perceived trajectory. This research suggests that in the foreseeable future, barring serious mistakes on its own part, the U.S. quite possibly will remain the dominant power in world politics.

Power is a central concept in studies of international politics. For Hans Morgenthau, the essence of international politics is a struggle for power, and a state's three basic types of foreign policy are to keep power, increase power, and demonstrate power. For Kenneth Waltz, power is the single most important attribute of a state; it is the distribution of power across states as units that defines the structure of an international system. And John Mearsheimer argues that a state's primary goal is power maximization, for either survival or expansion.<sup>1</sup>

One defining characteristic of the United States is its status as the sole superpower, but American self-perception of its power has always been rife with controversy. Although the U.S. in recent years has seemed to push for a unipolar world, back in the early 1970s President Richard Nixon had already put forward a five-pole thesis, arguing that a multipolar world would soon emerge.

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1. Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Knopf, 1978); Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979); and John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).

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In the 1980s, when President Ronald Reagan vigorously challenged the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) at the zenith of Soviet power, pessimism nonetheless permeated the U.S. Scholars argued that great powers invariably declined and the U.S. would be no exception, and that Japan would soon rise like a phoenix from the ashes of its World War Two defeat to supersede the U.S. as the number one power in the world. Some scholars even prepared a dirge for American hegemony. It was in the midst of this chorus of American declinism that the USSR collapsed and the U.S. emerged, overnight, as the world's sole superpower.

After the end of the Cold War, American scholars debated extensively whether the U.S. in fact had not won that war, whether the world power structure was indeed unipolar, whether supposed unipolarity would last just briefly, and whether sole superpower status was adequate for the U.S. Amid this uneasiness with American power, the so-called emerging European supracountry remained fragmented, its economy stagnating. Japan, once the much-heralded emerging "Number One," slid further toward the sidelines of world politics.

Consequently, self-perception of American power has experienced a drastic reversal. Some scholars have begun to argue that U.S. unipolarity is stable and long-lasting and that the country could afford to pursue any policy in world politics.<sup>2</sup> In the same vein, U.S. foreign policy has become unprecedentedly assertive. The 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty was thrown into the dustbin of history, military preemption for the first time became official U.S. doctrine, and the United Nations dangled at the brink of irrelevance. In the thick of this new triumphalism, however, some observers perceive a new quagmire for the U.S. in Iraq that, together with the sluggishness of the U.S. economy in the past few years, seems to foreshadow an America in incipient decline.

Power is one central tool with which a state pursues its foreign policy, but a state uses its power only on the basis of the self-perception of its relative power status. To adapt a famous saying by Harold and Margaret Sprout: what matters is how decision makers imagine the state's power to be, not how it actually is. An appropriate self-perception of its relative power status therefore is essential for a state to use its power to its advantage.

With the U.S. as the world's sole superpower, every twist and turn in American power status makes a significant impact on world politics. Scholarly discussions in the U.S. regarding American power raise some important questions. In what sense is the U.S. a superpower? To what extent have other countries recognized it as such? Is the U.S. in decline or rejuvenation? And is American power adequate for ensuring the country's security?

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2. See, for example, William Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* 24:1 (Summer 1999); Joshua Muravchik, *The Imperative of American Leadership* (Washington, D.C.: AEI [American Enterprise Institute] Press, 1996).

While American scholars search tirelessly for answers to those questions, it is illuminating to explore other countries' perceptions of American power: sometimes the onlooker sees most of the game. China is a good onlooker for this purpose. Though Russia is militarily much stronger, China at present seems to have more resources available for sustained development of its comprehensive national power. Europe and Japan are economically and technologically much more developed than China, but the latter is more unified than Europe and a more normal state<sup>3</sup> than Japan. India shares more similarities with China than other secondary powers do, but China is now one step ahead of India in economic development. To some extent, Chinese perceptions of American power may represent perceptions of the U.S. by all the secondary powers. Exploring the Chinese perceptions of American power therefore may help the U.S. to better understand its own power.

Chinese perceptions of American power are intrinsically valuable. Because China has been widely regarded as a rising power, how it behaves toward the U.S. depends to a large extent on how China perceives American power. If China perceives a weak U.S., there will be fewer inhibitions for China to challenge it. If China perceives a strong U.S., Beijing might want to be very cautious in its U.S. policy. And if China perceives a long-lasting American hegemony, bandwagoning would be its optimal option. Only if and when the U.S. is perceived as being overly imperialistic would China have a viable option of working with other major powers to vigorously balance against it. Exploring Chinese perceptions of American power therefore may not only help the U.S. to better understand its own power, it may also shed important light on China's U.S. policy.

The research in this article is based on a sample of 256 articles in six mainstream Chinese journals on international relations<sup>4</sup> from 1991 to the first half of 2004 whose titles suggest a focus on American power/capability. In this article, I intend to explore the Chinese perceptions of American power in the following areas: economy, science and technology, military, soft power, and the perceived trajectory of American power.

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3. Every sovereign state theoretically has the right to use force in settling international disputes. Japan is not considered a "normal state" because it has thus far renounced this right. According to Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, Japan forever renounces war "as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes." See <<http://www.solon.org/Constitutions/Japan/English/english-Constitution.html>>.

4. *Meiguo Yanjiu* (American Studies Quarterly), *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* (World Economics and Politics), *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu* (International Studies), *Waijiao Xueyuan Xuebao* (Journal of China Foreign Affairs University), *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* (Contemporary International Relations), and *Zhanlue yu Guanli* (Strategy and Management). For more detailed references, please see the author's doctoral dissertation, "China's Perception of the U.S.: An Exploration of China's Foreign Policy Motivations," Ohio State University, 2002.

## Chinese Perceptions of American Economic Capabilities

With regard to the American economy, what deeply impresses Chinese authors is its immense capability. Throughout the 1990s up to the early 21st century, the U.S. has been perceived as the number one economic power, enjoying vast superiority over other countries. Even in the early 1990s, when the U.S. was suffering from a recession and perceived as having declined economically, Chinese authors did not fail to point out that the U.S. was still the primary economic superpower, far stronger than any other country. The U.S. economy is so large that it approximately equals the combined total economies of over a dozen countries in the EU. In the world of some 200 countries, the American gross domestic product (GDP) accounts for some 30% of the world's total GDP. The fact that the U.S. on the one hand provides substantial aid to other countries and on the other exercises sanctions of one kind or another on more than 70 countries totaling over 50% of world population, plus the reality that the U.S. economy's ups and downs severely affect that of many other countries, all reinforce the perception of tremendous American economic power. Because a significant number of major transnational companies are U.S.-dominated, American economic power is often perceived as being able to grant or deny economic development to other countries.<sup>5</sup>

What Chinese observers tend to focus on is the overall picture: the U.S. is not only the largest economy but is also a leader in many specific economic fields. It has a well-developed market economy and the world's biggest market. It is number one in exports, number one in foreign trade, number one in overseas investment, number one in transnational companies, number one in the size of its service industry, and number one in service trade. U.S. industry is highly modernized, highly competitive, and the best in economic productivity. It is the main engine of world economic development. Except in production, the U.S. is superior to other industrialized countries in four out of five stages of the value chain: research, development, production, sales, and service.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, the perceived economic dominance of the U.S. is less salient than the country's perceived military dominance. While authors in the sample generally accept that the U.S. is a unipolar military power, some argue that when it comes to the economy, the U.S. shares the lead with a few other actors, especially the EU and Japan.<sup>7</sup>

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5. Wang Tiejun, "Kuaguo Ziben yu Meiguo Baquan" [Transnational capital and American hegemony], *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* 246 (February 2001), p. 75.

6. Xiao Lian, "Shengchanlu he Meiguo de Lingdao Diwei Yishu Pingjie" [On productivity and the leadership status of the United States], *ibid.*, 139 (March 1992), p. 73.

7. Xin Benjian, "Meiguo 2002 Niandu Guofang Baogao: Pingxi" [Comment on U.S. 2002 annual defense report], *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* 155 (September 2002), p. 16; Meng Honghua, "Guoji

In the past few years, the U.S. economy has slowed down. Still, Chinese authors are generally optimistic that the U.S. may avoid a traditional recession. The 9/11 tragedy is perceived as having had some impact on the U.S. economy, but most Chinese authors are confident that because the economy is robust, the impact of a recession would be limited. In 2002, a series of corporate scandals rocked the U.S., arousing conventional Chinese comments that U.S. economic system was, after all, not perfect. The editorial board of *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* adopted the view that although the U.S. economy not infrequently encounters problems, it is robust enough to deal with a variety of problems: therein lies the solid power of the U.S.<sup>8</sup>

### Chinese Perceptions of American Capabilities in Science and Technology

The U.S. has been consistently perceived as enjoying absolute superiority over other countries in science and technology. Some scholars argue that the U.S. is about 10 years ahead of Europe and Japan in new high technology, and 20 years ahead of China. They lament that Western countries, especially the U.S., are far more advanced than developing countries in technology, and it is very difficult for developing countries to narrow the gap. The U.S. is perceived as having by far more research funding than any other country, more than that of several major developed countries combined. In 1990, for instance, Japan's research and development (R&D) funding was only half that of America's, and Germany's was only one-fifth that of the U.S. In 2000, one review article cited an American source to the effect that the R&D funding of the G-7 accounts for 90% of the world's funding and the U.S.'s R&D funding equals the combined total of the other six G-7 countries.<sup>9</sup>

Chinese authors in the sample generally agree that the U.S. has many more R&D personnel than other developed countries. One author pointed out in 1995

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Jizhi yu Meiguo Baquan" [International regimes and American hegemony], *Meiguo Yanjiu* 15:1 (Spring 2001), pp. 82–83, 85.

8. Zhou Lin, "Meiguo Gongsi Chouwen Pouxu" [U.S. company scandals: The whys and wherefores], *Waijiao Xueyuan Xuebao* 70 (Winter 2002), pp. 50–54; Editorial Board, "Meishi Ziben Zhuyi de Kunjing yu Biange" [The dilemma and transformation of American-style capitalism], *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* 268 (December 2002), p. 1.

9. Ding Haojin, "Cong Chanye Jiaodu Kan Meiguo Jingji de Weilai" [Perceiving the future of the American economy from its industry], *Meiguo Yanjiu* 6:1 (Spring 1992), p. 31; Wu Tianbo, "Mei Ou Ri Jingji Liliang Duibi jiqi Bianhua Quxiang" [The distribution of economic power among the United States, Europe, and Japan and the trend of change], *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu* 46 (Winter 1992), p. 14; Li Huiming, "Zhishi Ziben yu Meiguo de Zhishi Jingji" [Knowledge capital and the knowledge economy of the United States], *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* 107 (September 1998), p. 29; Wang Fan, "Wending de Danji Shijie: Pingjie" [An analysis and introduction of *The Stability of Unipolarity*], *Meiguo Yanjiu* 14:1 (Spring 2000), p. 135. The G-7 countries are Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, and the U.S.

that Japan had 510,890 persons and Germany only 170,640, while the U.S. had 959,300 working in R&D. In 1995, some 45% of global scientific research was conducted in the U.S., more than the combined total of the next several major countries such as Japan, Germany, France, and Britain.<sup>10</sup>

The U.S. is perceived as being particularly strong in basic research and military research, but its civilian technology is perceived as developing relatively slowly. The U.S. possesses absolute superiority in aerospace technology and is currently the only country trying to develop a missile defense system. It is also considered to be particularly strong in computer technology; about two-thirds of the world's Internet-capable computers are in the U.S.

In the early 1990s, other Western countries, especially Japan, were perceived as having become powerful U.S. competitors in high technology; Japan was seen as poised to catch up in many high tech areas. Toward the late 1990s, however, the U.S. was perceived as having again strengthened its lead in science and technology over other countries. The first Bush and Clinton administrations were perceived as having strengthened American scientific research capability, leaving other countries lagging. Wang Jisi argued in 1997 that because the U.S. was the first country to enter the information age, it was well positioned to develop faster than other countries in sophisticated areas such as bioengineering, medical science, aerospace, and new materials. Writing the same year, Wu Yonghong drew from an American source to note that in the 1990s, the U.S. "greatly increased its lead over Japan and Europe in information and communication technology, [and] enjoys superiority" in biology, medical science, agriculture, and the food industry, although Japan and Europe have caught up with the U.S. in manufacturing industry and energy and have moved closer to the U.S. in environmental protection.<sup>11</sup> Now, from the first decade of the 21st century, the 1990s appears as a lost decade for Japan and a particularly prosperous one for the U.S. With European economies stagnating, the U.S. is perceived as having left Japan and Europe further behind in science and technology.

10. Wei Min, "Mei Ou Ri Jingji Shili Duibi de Bianhua Qushi" [The trend of change in the distribution of economic power among the United States, Europe, and Japan], *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu* 55 (Spring 1995), p. 34; Gao Feng, "Mei Ri Ou Jingji Shili Duibi de Xin Dongxiang" [New trend in the distribution of economic power among the United States, Japan, and Europe], *Shijie Jingji Yu Zhengzhi* 176 (April 1995), p. 34; Qi Chaoying, "Meiguo Tiaozheng Gaojishu Zhanlue Tanxi" [An exploration of the U.S.'s adjustment strategy regarding high technology], *ibid.*, 170 (October 1994), pp. 17–20; Liu Saili, "Shixi Meiguo Jingji de Chixu Zengzhang" [A tentative analysis of the U.S.'s sustained economic growth], *Waijiao Xueyuan Xuebao* 52 (Summer 1998), p. 37.

11. Wang Jisi, "Gaochu Bushenghan: Lengzhan hou Meiguo de Shijie Diwei Chutan" [High place is very cold: A preliminary exploration of the U.S. status in the world in the post-Cold War era], *Meiguo Yanjiu* 11:3 (Fall 1997), pp. 15–16; Wu Yonghong, "Meiguo zai Shijie Jingji zhong Diwei de Bianhua" [The change in status of the U.S. in the world economy], *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* 203 (July 1997), p. 67.

## Chinese Perceptions of American Military Power

### *Superiority in Military Power*

All authors in the sample acknowledge that the U.S. is a military superpower. Compared with other major powers, the U.S. demonstrates its most salient superiority in its military advantage. Even in the early 1990s, when the U.S. was seen as declining as a political and economic superpower, its military status was viewed as stable.

The U.S. is seen as desiring to maintain superiority in strategic nuclear forces and conventional forces, as well as in military theory. America is capable of turning out a new generation of weapon systems every five to ten years. Even when the U.S. was reducing its military expenditure during the early post-Cold War years, it was perceived as having enhanced its military capability through accelerated development of military technology.

The following points are presented by Chinese observers as evidence of American military superiority. First, America's military expenditure is huge, more than the combined totals of eight other major military powers, "about two times that of its NATO allies, three times that of Russia, and over ten times that of China."<sup>12</sup> Yet, that was not the best the U.S. could do, since during the post-Cold War period, American annual military expenditure accounts for only about 3% of the country's GNP, while during the Cold War such expenditure usually ran about 6% of GNP. By contrast, during World War Two, U.S. overall federal expenditure accounted for as much as 48% of GNP; much of this was military expenditure.

Second, the U.S. is seen as having the capability to prevail in conventional warfare with any country. It has developed weapons to conduct highly advanced warfare and possesses the only blue-water navy in the world; its air force is unquestionably the best, and it is the only country capable of conducting military operations in any corner of the globe. And third, the U.S. is a nuclear power with no peer competitor. It maintains a large arsenal of nuclear weapons, its nuclear deterrence is considerable, and it is possibly the only country possessing a nuclear first-strike capability against other major powers.

The U.S. deployment of a large number of troops abroad also contributes to Chinese perceptions of American military superiority, although troop strength has been reduced from Cold War levels. During the post-Cold War period, the U.S. deployed forces abroad dozens of times, to areas in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and Africa. In the wake of 9/11, the U.S. has greatly expanded its sphere of influence. When necessary, it is capable of establishing

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12. Han Weidong and Han Yaodong, "Meiguo Xin Shiji Baquan Zhanlue yu Zhongguo Guojia Anquan" [The U.S.'s hegemonic strategy in the new century and China's national security], *Shijie Jingji Yu Zhengzhi* 234 (February 2000), p. 54; Wang Jisi, "Gaochu Bushenghan," p. 16.



regional defense headquarters in various corners of the world. As a result, the U.S. is perceived by the Chinese as having the greatest capability for foreign intervention, unrivaled by any other single country or any group of countries.

*U.S. Military Power Compared with Russia's*

Chinese authors in the sample generally agree that Russia's military capability drastically declined following the end of the Cold War. When the U.S. and USSR were negotiating the first Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I), the latter was perceived as being only slightly inferior to the former in military capability. The unequal reduction of nuclear weapons by the two countries prescribed by START II in 1993 decisively established American superiority and Russia's acceptance of its own strategic inferiority. The American development of missile defense systems has been perceived as further tilting the military balance in favor of the U.S.

Following the end of the Cold War, Russia was greatly weakened and its military capability probably declined by 50%. As a result, as Wu Zhan saw the matter in 1998, it is no longer possible for Russia to initiate a nuclear first strike against the U.S., although such an action might be possible for the U.S. to take against Russia.<sup>13</sup> NATO's war against Yugoslavia, and its expansion into Eastern Europe and the former USSR, both demonstrate Russia's impotence vis-à-vis U.S. military might. Washington's withdrawal from the ABM treaty is seen as reflecting Russia's weakened capability to compete with the U.S. in another arms race. On the whole, Chinese authors note that the U.S. now does not take Russia's position and sensitivities as seriously as it did in the past.

Nevertheless, throughout the 1990s until the present, most scholars in the sample believed that Russia was still a military superpower capable of confronting the U.S. Liu Huaqiu and Qin Zhongmin tended to concur with the U.S. assessment that Russia was capable of destroying the U.S. in one all-out strike.<sup>14</sup> As a result, authors in the sample tend to regard the mutual deterrence between the U.S. and Russia as operating at more or less the same level as during the Cold War.<sup>15</sup>

13. Wang Weimin, "Meiguo de Beiyue Dongkuo Zhanlue Pingxi" [An analysis of the U.S. Strategy for NATO eastward expansion], *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* 87 (February 1997), pp. 6-7; Wu Zhan, "Meiguo Dangqian de Hewuqi Zhengce yu Hecaijun" [The U.S.'s current nuclear weapon policy and nuclear reduction], *Meiguo Yanjiu* 12:2 (Summer 1998), pp. 7, 10-15.

14. Liu Huaqiu, Qin Zhongmin, "Ping Mei E Di'er Jieduan Xuejian Zhanlue Wuqi Tiaoyue" [On START II of the U.S. and Russia], *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu* 48 (Autumn 1993), p. 4.

15. Xie Deyuan, "Geju Bianhua hou de Meiguo Duiwai Zhengce" [U.S. foreign policy after the change of the polar structure], *Waijiao Xueyuan Xuebao* 31 (Spring 1993), p. 28; Zhang Yeliang, "Shilun Meiguo de Fan Kuosan Zhanlue" [A tentative analysis of the U.S.'s anti-proliferation strategy], *Meiguo Yanjiu* 10:4 (Winter 1996), p. 79; Su Ge, "Lun Zhong Mei E Guanxi" [On China-U.S.-Russia relations], *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu* 89 (May/June 2002), p. 107.



*U.S. Military Power Compared with China's*

The U.S. is perceived as being militarily much stronger than China. The Pentagon deploys a large number of troops in Asia, potentially to deal with China. Its military technology is perceived as being much more advanced than China's; simply by transferring such technology to Taiwan, the U.S. makes it difficult for China to solve the Taiwan problem through military means.<sup>16</sup>

Even though China has a limited number of nuclear weapons, it cannot initiate a nuclear strike against the U.S. because such action would spur disastrous retaliation; moreover, Washington's missile defense system, currently under development, has the potential of further neutralizing China's nuclear deterrence. Chinese authors have generally agreed that China should both ensure its deterrence against nuclear attacks and avoid an arms race with other countries. Wu Zhan argued in 1998 that China should accept the nuclear superiority of the U.S. and Russia because for China, nuclear weapons were to be used solely for deterrence. Writing in 2002, Ge Lide confidently asserted that China is capable of maintaining its nuclear deterrence.<sup>17</sup> Though quite a few authors argue that it would not be easy for the U.S. to monopolize nearby sectors of outer space, they nonetheless concede that it might not be a good idea for China to compete with the U.S. in space technology. Zhang Wenmu suggested in 2003 that China should leapfrog to developing deep sea technology to avoid such competition while retaining deterrence.<sup>18</sup>

Hu Angang and Liu Taoxiong the same year published an impressive comparison of national defense capital among the U.S., China, Japan, and India, concluding that China's defense capital was approximately on a par with India's and Japan's, while American defense capital totaled about twice that of China, Japan, and India combined. Even though the U.S. is regarded by all Chinese authors as militarily superior over China, they nonetheless maintain that Washington does not have the need or capability to comprehensively contain China.<sup>19</sup>

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16. Dai Bing, "Meiguo dui Taiwan de Jishu Shuchu" [The U.S.'s technology transfer to Taiwan], *Shijie Jingji Yu Zhengzhi* 229 (September 1999), p. 77.

17. Wu Zhan, "Meiguo Dangqian de Hewuqi," pp. 24, 27–28; Ge Lide, "Meiguo Tuichu Fandao Tiaoyue ji Zhanlue Fandao Xitong de Fazhan Qianjing" [The U.S.'s withdrawal from ABM Treaty and the prospect of its anti-missile system], *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* 260 (April 2002), p. 42.

18. Zhang Wenmu, "Lun Zhongguo Haiquan" [On China's sea rights], *ibid.*, 278 (October 2003), p. 13.

19. Hu Angang and Liu Taoxiong, "Zhong Mei Ri Yin Guofang Shili Bijiao" [National defensive power: A comparison among China, U.S., Japan, and India], *Zhanlue yu Guanli* 61 (November/December 2003), pp. 42–44.

## Chinese Perceptions of American Soft Power

Soft power is new to Chinese authors but has quickly become a popular term for assessing American power. Scholars in the sample generally agree, usually implicitly, that the U.S. enjoys superiority in this respect. Some authors approvingly cite American scholars such as Joseph Nye and Samuel Huntington to the effect that the West, led by the U.S., is able to dominate the world because it enjoys superiority not only in hard power but also in soft power.

In rare cases, Chinese authors have explicitly accepted that the U.S. enjoys superiority not only in hard power but also in soft power, including American culture, language, systems, values, and management capability.<sup>20</sup> Authors in the sample do not dispute that the U.S. has advantages in its political system, which constitutes a source of American soft power. Zhou Sanming, Li Desong, and Xu Lisun have recognized that international organizations, laws, norms, regimes, rules of the game, etc. have been established basically in accordance with U.S. political will and constitute a source of American soft power. A sophisticated international financial regime helps the U.S. to compete with other countries. Arrangements such as free trade, intellectual property rights, nuclear non-proliferation, and intervention by the International Monetary Fund in the economies of developing countries all contribute to American political, economic, and security interests.<sup>21</sup>

Unlike in the case of Chinese perceptions of U.S. hard power, Chinese authors do not uniformly accept that the country enjoys absolute superiority in soft power. Wang Jisi asserts that the U.S. suffers from problems such as poor education and weak social cohesiveness because of racial conflicts, a high crime rate, broken families, political scandals, etc. As a result, America's weakness lies not in its hard power but in its soft power.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless 9/11 is perceived to have had the effect of overcoming this weakness by mobilizing resources in the U.S. to carry out the government's foreign policy.

When the U.S. emphasizes human rights and democracy in its foreign policy toward developing countries, some Chinese authors have acknowledged that this approach can indeed put developing countries on the defensive and produce effects that cannot be accomplished by the use of hard power, but they also claimed that because of the resistance of developing countries, the

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20. Li Dongyan, "Ping Lenzhan hou Meiguo de Ganyu Zhengce" [On the U.S.'s intervention policy in the post-Cold War era], *Shijie Jingji Yu Zhengzhi* 167 (July 1994), p. 68.

21. Zhou Sanming, "Guoji Huobi Tixi yu Meiguo Baquan [International currency system and American hegemony], *ibid.*, 235 (March 2000), pp. 33–34; Li Desong and Xu Lisun, "Meiguo Ruhe Liyong Zishen Guoji Youshi Weihu qi Jingji Anquan" [How the U.S. uses its own international advantage to safeguard its economic security], *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* 118 (August 1999), pp. 29–30; Wang Tiejun, "Kuaguo Ziben," pp. 71–76.

22. Wang Jisi, "Gaochu Bushenghan," pp. 18–24, 34.

effect of this approach is limited. Pang Zhongying conceded in 1997 that developing countries usually have too little soft power and cannot compete with countries with great amounts of soft power, but he also argued that in the case of Asian countries, their culture, traditional values, and development patterns can potentially endow them with greater soft power than they currently enjoy.<sup>23</sup>

### The Impact of the Iraq War

The Iraq War has been perceived by some Chinese observers as both a great success for the U.S. in power politics and a serious setback in terms of its soft power. After the initial U.S. military success in Iraq, Chinese authors generally agreed that the U.S. had demonstrated absolute dominance in world politics. The U.S. could do anything it wanted to do, could fight any war anywhere it chose, and no country could challenge its power status.<sup>24</sup> Secondary powers and international institutions were constrained by the U.S. much more than the U.S. was constrained by them. Insurgents in Iraq did cause serious difficulties for the U.S. but they did not constitute a substantial threat to the U.S. military. But gradually, the U.S. has begun to be perceived as being limited in its capability for foreign intervention. It does not have enough troops for rotation, it does not have enough money to fund the occupation, and the American people are not psychologically prepared for sustained operations involving steady, significant casualties and enormous expenditure.<sup>25</sup>

Most authors in the sample agree that the Iraq War has caused the U.S. to suffer a tremendous loss of its soft power. Soft power here refers to moral appeal, national image, and international legitimacy. Consequently, while the U.S. enjoys greater hard power than before, its influence on other countries has declined. Moreover, it is sometimes portrayed as the biggest challenger to the international order and thus encounters soft balancing, especially by its own allies and by international institutions.

Some scholars believe it might not be easy for the U.S. to recover its loss in soft power and suggest that a vague confrontation between the U.S. and the international community already exists. If in an unlikely scenario the U.S.

23. Liu Wenzhong, "Baquan Zhuyi de Zhuolie Biaoxian: Ping Meiguo Guowuyuan Renquan Baogao" [An awkward demonstration of hegemonism: On the U.S. State Department's human rights report], *Waijiao Xueyuan Xuebao* 40 (Summer 1995), pp. 47–49; Pang Zhongying, "Guoji Guanxi zhong de Ruan Liliang ji Qita: Ping Meiguo Yuesefu Nai de *Zhuding Lingdao*" [Soft power in international relations and others: On American scholar Joseph Nye's *Bound to Lead*], *Zhanlue yu Guanli* 21 (March/April 1997), p. 51.

24. Zhang Liangui, "Caoxian de Hewuqi yu Meiguo de Jingcha Juese" [North Korea's nuclear weapons and the U.S.'s police role], *ibid.*, 60 (September/October 2003), p. 71.

25. Zhang Liangui, "Caoxian de Hewuqi," p. 71; Li Zhilin, "Yilake Danqian Anquan Xingshi zhi Wojian" [The current security situation in Iraq], *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* 169 (November 2003), p. 39; Qian Qichen, "Yilake Zhanzheng yu Meiguo" [The Iraq war and the U.S.], *Waijiao Xueyuan Xuebao* 74 (Winter 2003), p. 6.

continues forcefully along its unilateral road, this course might ultimately spawn a broad anti-U.S. coalition. But others, such as Qin Yaqin, argue that the U.S. can recover from the deterioration of relations with its allies and can also restore its international legitimacy.<sup>26</sup>

## The Perceived Trajectory of American Power Status

### *Perceived American Decline in the Early 1990s*

In the early 1990s, many authors in the sample perceived an America in decline. They asserted that the U.S. had been declining economically in the previous several decades and would decline further in the 1990s, both within the world economy and in terms of its international influence. The following were the perceived symptoms of the supposed American decline: reduced competitiveness, weakened manufacturing industry, less attractiveness as a major locus of foreign investment, a shift from status as the biggest creditor nation to the biggest debtor nation, lower status within the world banking system, and decreased levels of investment in foreign countries. Other symptoms were said to include a low rate of productivity growth rate, fixed capital investment, infrastructure investment, plus a large trade deficit.<sup>27</sup>

### *The Rise of Europe, Japan, and China*

At the same time, in the early 1990s Europe and Japan were perceived to be on the rise; the relative American decline was, in fact, based mostly on a comparison between the U.S. on the one hand and Japan and Europe, especially Germany, on the other. Scholars in the sample thought that Japan was gradually evolving into a powerful competitor of the U.S. in terms of high technology, currency valuation, and overall competitiveness. The Chinese scholars saw Japan as capable of economically surpassing the U.S. before long and they predicted faster economic growth in Europe than in the U.S. over the decade.

26. Qin Yaqing, "Quanshi Baquan, Zhidu Baquan, yu Meiguo de Diwei" [Power hegemony, institutional hegemony, and the status of the U.S.], *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* 173 (March 2004), pp. 7–8.

27. Chu Yukun, "Shilun Zhanhou Meiguo Dijiu Ji Jingji Shuaitui" [A tentative analysis of the U.S.'s ninth economic recession after World War Two], *Shijie Jingji Yu Zhengzhi* 135 (November 1991), p. 10; Sun Haishun, "Lun Mei, Ri, Xi'ou Guoji Ziben Diwei de Xinbianhua" [On the new changes in status of the international capital of the U.S., Japan, and Western Europe], *Meiguo Yanjiu* 6:1 (Spring 1992), pp. 91–92; Jin Dexiang, "Why Does the U.S. Decline Relatively?" *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* 33 (February 1992), p. 13; Ji Wei, "Meiguo Jingji Mianlin de Xinwenti" [The new problems facing the U.S. economy], *Shijie Jingji Yu Zhengzhi* 158 (October 1993), pp. 6–8; Huang Hong, "Meiguo Quanguo Zhanlue Tiaozheng zhong de Neizai Maodun ji Zhiyue Yinsu" [The intrinsic contradictions and constraining factors in the adjustment of the U.S.'s global strategy], *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* 40 (March 1993), p. 32.

The euro was thought to be developing as a powerful rival to the U.S. dollar. These observers argued that Europe and Japan might soon emerge into two new economic poles in the capitalist world, posing a serious challenge to the U.S. role as an economic superpower.<sup>28</sup>

It was predicted that by 2020, Japan, Germany, Austria, France, and Norway would all surpass the U.S. in per capita GNP. The American lead over Japan and Europe in technology would dwindle and disappear over the 1990s. EU integration was considered a factor contributing to the relative American decline in the world economy. Countries like Germany and Japan were perceived as competing with the U.S. not only economically but also politically.

In the early 21st century, the "rise of China" has become a salient subject in Chinese journals. Most Chinese scholars believe that China's rise will primarily be economic. They expect that by around 2050, China will approach the U.S. in GDP, but they concede that in most other aspects of national power U.S. superiority over China will still be obvious, especially in military capability and per capita GDP. In their 2003 study, Hu Angang and Liu Taoxiong seem to support this estimate: in the past 20 years, the gap in PPP (purchasing power parity) has narrowed from four times to less than two times. But Shi Ming, cited in an article by Peng Lei, believes such an estimate is too optimistic: if we look at the price of hamburgers, China's currency is indeed undervalued, but from the price of Hondas, which in China are sold at twice the global market price, China's currency is overvalued.<sup>29</sup>

In the same article, Tan Shizhong gives qualifying conditions of China's rise: no world wars, no major policy blunders, no serious social disturbances, and no extraordinary natural disasters. Somewhat differently, Shi Yinghong emphasizes the importance of political and social stability and economic and political reforms in China's rise. If everything goes smoothly, Shi Yinghong expects that around 2050, China will be markedly more powerful than any country except the U.S., and the power gap between the two will also be greatly narrowed.<sup>30</sup>

28. Ding Haojin, "Cong Chanye Jiaodu," p. 31; Qi Chaoying, "Meiguo Tiaozheng," p. 17; Wang Haihan, "Meiguo de Quanqiu Zhanlue Mianlin Yanzhong Tiaozhan" [The U.S.'s global strategy faces serious challenge], *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu* 46 (Winter 1992), p. 23; Xie Deyuan, "Geju Bianhua hou," pp. 30, 32–33.

29. Cai Tuo, "NGO: Pingpan Meiguo Guoji Yingxiangli de yige Xinxiangdu" [NGO: A new dimension to evaluate the U.S.'s international influence], in *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* 173 (March 2004), pp. 24–25; Hu and Liu, "Zhong Mei Ri Ying Guofang," pp. 42–44; Peng Lei, "Zhongguo de Jueqi ji Zhongguo yu Qita Disan Shijie Guojia de Guanxi: Yantaohui Jiyao" [Seminar briefing: China's rise and China's relations with other third world countries], *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* 284 (April 2004), pp. 79–80.

30. Peng Lei, "Zhongguo de Jueqi," p. 79; Shi Yinghong, "Meiguo Guoji Quanshi: Bijiao yu Bianhua" [The U.S.'s international power status: Comparison and change], *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* 173 (March 2004), p. 5.

Somewhat different from earlier discussions of the rise of other countries, Chinese authors generally manifest a more moderate optimism regarding China's rise. They do not expect the ascent to be rapid, nor do they think that China will surpass the U.S. anytime soon. While they agree that China most likely will continue to rise in the next several decades, they also take the view that the 21st century will be an American century.

*Multipolarization Would Be the Trend*

In the early 1990s, with the perceived relative decline of the U.S. and the expected rise of Europe and Japan, many Chinese authors predicted that the future global trend would be multipolarization. Western Europe would emerge as a new pole, and Japan likely would as well. As a result, Europe and Japan would move toward becoming equal partners with the U.S., trying to share the leadership of world affairs. Because of multipolarization, the entire 21st century might not remain an American century. For one instance, according to Guo Shixian, in the international monetary system a tripolarity between the U.S. dollar, Japanese yen, and Deutschemark was predicted to emerge as early as around 2010; the rise of the euro would inevitably weaken the capability of the U.S. to dominate world affairs.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to Europe and Japan, authors in the sample perceived an important role for other powers, especially Russia and China. And they also took notice of the rise of India, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, South Korea, South Africa, and Brazil. Xi Runchang expected that a semblance of the future multipolar structure would emerge as early as around 1995. And in terms of Southeast Asia, a multipolar structure was seen as already existing in the early 1990s.<sup>32</sup>

*Since the Late 1990s, Chinese Authors Have  
Modified the American Decline Thesis*

By the mid-1990s, Chinese authors began to notice that the U.S. economy was doing remarkably well. Quite a few authors marveled at its brilliant performance and were generally optimistic about its future. By the end of the decade, they generally agreed that the U.S. economy had been doing much better than its major competitors and America had increased its lead over other countries. Since the mid-to-late 1990s, the U.S. had been perceived as either having

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31. Guo Shixian, "Luelun Zhanhou Meiyuan de Guoji Diwei Jiqi 90 Niandai Qianjing" [A brief analysis of the U.S. dollar's international status and its prospect in the 1990s], *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* 154 (June 1993), p. 16.

32. Xi Runchang, "Qianxi Mei Ri Ou Sanji Jiegou he Shijie Duojuhwa Qushi" [A preliminary analysis of U.S.-Japan-Europe tripolarity and the trend of the world toward multipolarity], *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* 15 (January 1991), pp. 4, 8.

solved its earlier problems or as being capable of keeping them under control. In a sharp departure from scholars in the early 1990s, Song Yuhua and Chen Ze argued in 2002 that because the U.S. is both the world's largest importer and the largest exporter, a trade deficit not only would not contribute to an American decline but ultimately would be beneficial to this country.<sup>33</sup>

Toward the end of the 1990s, many Chinese authors predicted that the U.S. would not decline and would maintain its status as the sole superpower. Shi Ren was more cautious, expecting the status quo to continue for at least the next five to ten years, while Wu Yonghong and Zeng Bingxi predicted a much longer duration. Wang Jisi, Song Yuhua, and Lu Huajun argued that the U.S. in many ways had not declined at all, even in the 1980s and the early 1990s.<sup>34</sup>

Wang Fan was among the most optimistic observers, predicting that unipolarity would last for at least several more decades. Sun Shilian shared the presumably dominant opinion in the U.S., tending to predict that American economic expansion may continue endlessly. Wang Jisi was more cautious, opining that the U.S. would not lose its status as a superpower although its capability to dominate the world would become somewhat limited. Li Desong, Xu Lisun, and Gu Wenyan argued that the U.S. has positioned itself for continued economic dominance in the world by developing economic relations in the Asia-Pacific region, transferring undesirable factories to other countries, and achieving a safe lead in areas such as computers, information, and communication, regarded as the keys to competitiveness through the 21st century.<sup>35</sup>

On the other hand, with the perceived rise of the U.S. in the second half of the 1990s, authors in the sample saw a relative decline of Japan and Europe. Zhang Xiaotang in 1997 offered the gloomiest account of Japan, comparing it to a "processing factory" for the U.S. Some authors were pessimistic about

33. Song Yuhua and Chen Ze, "Meiguo de Ju'e Maoyi Nicha Fenxi" [An analysis of America's large unfavorable balance of trade], *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* 267 (November 2002), p. 64.

34. Shi Ren, "Lun Shiji zhijiao Mei Ou Ri de Jingji Fazhan" [On the economic development of the United States, Europe, and Japan around the turn of the century], *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* 98 (January 1998) pp. 6–8; Wu Yonghong, "Meiguo zai Shijie Jingji," p. 68; Zeng Bingxi, "Dangqian Meiguo Jingji Kuozhang ji duiqi Baquan Diwei de Yingxiang" [Current American economic expansion and the impact on its hegemonic status], *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu* 73 (Autumn 1999), p. 45; Wang Jisi, "Gaochu Bushenghan," p. 33; Song Yuhua and Lu Huajun, "Guanyu Meiguo Waimao Nicha yu Waimao Diwei de Shikao" [Thinking about the U.S.'s foreign trade deficit and foreign trade status], *Meiguo Yanjiu* 11:3 (Fall 1997), p. 101.

35. Wang Fan, "Wending de Danji Shijie," p. 143; Sun Shilian, "Meiguo Jingjijie Renshi jiu Mei Jingji Qianjing Zhankai Bianlun" [Debate in American economic circles on America's economic prospects], *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* 218 (October 1998), pp. 68–69; Wang Jisi, "Gaochu Bushenghan," p. 33; Li and Xu, "Meiguo Ruhe Liyong," pp. 29–30; Gu Wenyan, "Mei Jingji Xingshi jidui Zhongmei Jingmao Guanxi de Yingxiang" [The U.S.'s economic situation and its impact on China-U.S. economic and trade relations], *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* 114 (April 1999), p. 16.



China's development. Zeng Bingxi argued the next year that because developed countries monopolized information technology, it would be very difficult for developing countries to succeed in the so-called information economy. Writing in 2002, Li Changjiu attributed the inability of China to narrow the economic gap with the U.S. to China's lack of R&D funding, which in 1998 was less than 1/30 of the U.S.'s, 1/18 of Japan's and one-half of South Korea's.<sup>36</sup>

In spite of the general optimism toward the end of the 1990s among Chinese scholars regarding the U.S. economy, a minority continued to be cautious. Wang Jian and Zhou Li asserted that U.S. prosperity was propped up by a large inflow of foreign capital and the economic bubble would explode sooner or later. Somehow, even when the U.S. was perceived as having entered a period of sustained economic growth in the mid- to late 1990s, most authors in the sample continued to argue that multipolarization would be the future trend of the world. After the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, however, multipolarization was mentioned less often than before in the international relations literature. "Speedy development toward multipolarity" quietly gives way to "zigzag evolution toward multipolarity."<sup>37</sup> While in the 1990s Chinese authors generally expected that the U.S. would maintain its absolute dominance for another 10 to 20 years, by the early 21st century most leading Chinese scholars had come to believe that the U.S. would remain the sole superpower at least until 2050. Shi Yinghong and Jin Canrong claimed that the U.S. actually is the strongest power in Western history, stronger even than Rome at its zenith. Lin Limin argued that even if all great powers eventually decline, the U.S. will still be the longest lasting great power in history. Mei Renyi suggests that the U.S. today is even more powerful than it was right after the end of World War Two. Wang Jisi nonetheless does not preclude the possibility of an unexpected American decline stemming from major terrorist attacks, high-cost wars, or loss of attraction for foreign talent, in addition to the vague possibility of an anti-U.S. alliance among major secondary powers.<sup>38</sup> Although in the 1990s

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36. Zhang Xiaotang, "Ping Meiguo Shuailuolun de Sida Jingji Zhidian" [On the four economic rationales of the American decline thesis], *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* 197 (January 1997), pp. 69–71; Zeng Bingxi, "Meiguo Xinjingji ji qi dui Shijie Jingji de Yingxiang" [The new U.S. economy and its impact on the world economy], *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu* 65 (May/June 1998), pp. 45–46; Li Changjiu, "Zhongmei Jingmao Guanxi de Weilai" [The future of China-U.S. economic and trade relations], *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* 152 (June 2002), p. 2.

37. Wang Jian, "Jijiang Daolai de Meiyuan Weiji" [The coming U.S. dollar crisis], *Zhanlue yu Guanli* 29 (July/August 1998), pp. 31–37; Zhou Li, "Quanqiuxing Shuaitui Jianghui Daolai: Meiguo de Haishishenlou ji Shijie de Weixian" [The imminence of global recession: The fake U.S. prosperity and the danger to the world], *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* 235 (March 2000), p. 80; Wang Jisi, "Meiguo Baquan de Luoji" [The logic of American hegemony], *Meiguo Yanjiu* 17:3 (Fall 2003), p. 28.

38. Wang Jisi et al., "Meiguo Guoji Diwei Zhoushi Pinggu" [Assessments on the future of the U.S.'s international standing], *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* 173 (March 2004), pp. 2–28.

Chinese authors obviously resented the U.S.'s self-proclaimed status as the leader of the world, in the early 21st century, some Chinese scholars seem to have accepted this status, although sometimes grudgingly, saying that U.S. dominance is actually good for the stability of the world and for China's economic interests.<sup>39</sup>

*Briefly Accounting for the Change in  
the Chinese Perceptions of American Power*

Chinese perceptions of American power have undergone substantial change during the 14 years covered by this article. In the early 1990s, the U.S. was perceived as being in decline, multipolarization was thought to be inevitable, and actors such as Japan and the European Union were regarded as serious challenges to the unipolar status of the U.S. In the late 1990s, the U.S. was thought to be in the process of rejuvenation and the gap between it and other major powers was viewed as widening rather than narrowing. In the early 21st century, the U.S. is perceived as being unquestionably the dominant power in the world: no country is thought to be in a position to challenge its unipolar status. Chinese authors now generally believe that in the foreseeable future, perhaps at least until 2050, the U.S. will remain the sole superpower. Why has their perception undergone such a drastic change? I suggest the following explanations.

First, the reality principle. The human mind is not divorced from reality and actively seeks information to form a true picture of the environment. After all, not accurately understanding the environment would result in decisions costly to the perceiver or decision maker. This cognitive principle suggests that Chinese scholars do try hard to learn about what has happened in the U.S.; the change in their perceptions reflects the real change in U.S. power over the past 14 years.

Second, the consistency principle. The human mind works to keep internal beliefs consistent with one another. New information inconsistent with existing beliefs is uncomfortable and will therefore be either neglected or discounted. This cognitive principle suggests that when U.S.-China relations are in trouble, Chinese perceivers are more likely to discount American power. One salient example is China's characterization in the 1950s of the U.S. as a

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39. Guo Xuetang, "Baquan Zhouqulun de Pinkun" [The poverty of the theory of hegemonic cycles], *Meiguo Yanjiu* 17:3 (Fall 2003), p. 45; Zhu Feng, "Yilake Zhanzheng yu Guoji Zhanlue Geju de Xin Taishi" [The Iraq war and its implications for international strategic patterns], *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* 279 (November 2003), pp. 33-34; Jia Qingguo, "Danbian Zhuyi haishi Duobian Zhuyi" [Unilateralism or multilateralism], *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* 166 (August 2003), p. 10; Lin Limin, "Fuza Tiaozhan xia de Nengli Xiandu" [Limit of capability under complicated challenge], *ibid.*, 173 (March 2004), pp. 14-15.

paper tiger, even though the PRC's economy was then deplorably backward. Consequently, the change of Chinese perception over the past 14 years more or less reflects a reduced threat perception and increased opportunity perception from the U.S.

Third, group think. People behave differently in a group than they do as individuals. As individuals, they could not but think independently, but as members of a group, they face pressure to achieve consensus. Especially when things are uncertain, people have a strong inclination to accept the opinions of others in the group. Views conforming to the dominant opinion are easy to express and require little effort to rationalize; dissident views are uncomfortable and may even be costly. Group think theory suggests that Chinese scholars do not function completely independently of their American counterparts. Thus, the change of Chinese perception more or less reflects the change of Americans' self-perception of American power.

Fourthly, the availability effect. The human mind seeks accurate information about the environment, but because of internal and external constraints the mind can only be boundedly rational. As a result, people routinely resort to heuristics in decision making. One important heuristic device is the availability effect: judgment making is strongly influenced by the extent to which relevant cases can be brought to mind. The availability effect suggests that countries that have successfully demonstrated their power will convey an image of strength. Thus, it was the American use of force abroad, especially against the will of the U.N. and other major powers, that accounts for the change in Chinese perceptions of American power.

Analysis of source materials suggests that all four mechanisms above may have contributed to the change in Chinese perceptions of American power. When the U.S. was in recession in the early 1990s, Chinese authors tended to perceive a U.S. in decline, but when the American economy prospered in the late 1990s, they tended to perceive a U.S. in rejuvenation. When U.S.-China relations reached low tide following the Tiananmen tragedy, Chinese authors were more likely to perceive a U.S. in trouble; but when relations were back on the right track, observers were more likely to perceive a strong U.S. When American scholars themselves are overwhelmingly pessimistic about American power, Chinese authors often concur with them; when American scholars demonstrate greater confidence in their country's power, this image of strength is more or less projected onto Chinese publications. And finally, when the U.S. is particularly assertive, as in the case of Kosovo, Iraq, the ABM, and the pre-emption doctrine, Chinese authors are more easily convinced of the U.S.'s unrivaled power. Additionally, changes regarding Chinese perceivers may also have accounted for the shifts in Chinese perceptions of the U.S., including generational change, changes in perceivers' exposure to the U.S., differences in perceivers' situations in China, etc. Accounting for change in the Chinese

perception of the U.S. is an important subject and will be examined in future research.

### Conclusion

The research in this paper generally supports some American scholars' optimism in recent years regarding American power. While during the Maoist period, the U.S. was typically portrayed as a paper tiger, mainstream Chinese authors in the past decade have accepted that the U.S. is the sole superpower, enjoying vast superiority over other countries. The U.S. was perceived as sharing economic leadership with Europe and Japan in the early 1990s, but since the late 1990s, its leadership status in world economy has become much more salient than that of Europe and Japan. The U.S., Europe, and Japan are similarly leaders in science and technology, standing head and shoulders above the rest of the world in this respect. While Europe and Japan are perceived as being on a par, the U.S. is regarded as being about 10 years ahead of them. The U.S. is a military superpower; Russia is barely capable of maintaining a tenuous equilibrium with its rival. The U.S. is perceived as enjoying significant superiority even in soft power, but Chinese authors seem to believe that narrowing the gap in soft power between the U.S. and Third World countries might not be as difficult as narrowing the gap in hard power. Chinese authors recently have often identified China as a rising power, but they are realistic enough to acknowledge that a vast power gap exists with the U.S. For the foreseeable future, China's rise therefore is more about relative improvement of the country's status in the world than about catching up with or overtaking the U.S. Though Chinese scholars generally hope that everything will go well for China in the next five decades, many observers, both Chinese and Western, have cautioned that there are too many possible slips between cup and lip. Even if China were blessed with propitious fortune, possibly in due time, as James Hoge suggests, it could be overtaken by an even more robust India.

Because China is currently one of the most salient rising powers, Chinese perceptions of American power seem to suggest that for the foreseeable future, the U.S. will most likely remain the undisputable sole superpower; the power gap, especially military, between the U.S. and the rest of the world may not easily narrow; and that no country will be in a position to challenge U.S. primacy. The perceived Achilles' heel in American soft power might perhaps arouse some concern, as one scenario of premature termination of American dominance is the vague possibility of a broad anti-U.S. coalition emerging that stems from serious deterioration of the U.S.'s international legitimacy.

China has been remarkably conservative in its U.S. policy. When China disapproves of America's international behaviors, its response is habitually no more than verbal protests. As a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council,

China has demonstrated the utmost reluctance in exercising its veto power. The research for this article indicates that among other things, such as the Chinese admiration of many aspects of the U.S. and the Chinese wish to benefit from a bilateral partnership, the perception of the power gap between the two countries might also be a major factor explaining China's restraint in its U.S. policy. As China perceives the likelihood of a relatively long-lasting American hegemony, trying to improve bilateral relations quite possibly might remain China's preferred policy for the foreseeable future.

The absolute U.S. superiority poses the question of what to do with American primacy. The dominant school in the 1990s believed that unipolar distribution of power was but an anomaly in human history and the logic of international politics would before long maneuver the world away from unipolarity. The best option for the U.S., therefore, was to prepare for inevitable multipolarity. As it became clear that unipolarity would not evaporate after a brief moment, scholars such as William Wohlforth began to argue for greater interventionism to manage the system. The essence of this school's argument is enshrined in the 2002 National Security Strategy of the U.S.; its first experiment is the on-going war in Iraq.

Soon enough the cost of an Iraq-style war sinks in. A tremendous amount of American wealth vanishes tracelessly into the deserts and the daily spilling of American blood steadily wears down American patience. Most deplorably, the U.S. has broadly ceased to be perceived as a benign hegemon: anti-Americanism surges in various corners of the world. As the U.S. fights to spread American values in foreign lands, American values seem to have lost some ground in their homeland. William Wohlforth suggests that properly managing relations with major Eurasian powers is the key to preserving American unipolarity, but recent events in Iraq indicate that winning the hearts and minds of people in the street is no less important. The most significant message of this research is perhaps that the U.S. still has decades to figure out what to do with its primacy. On the one hand, the U.S. should continue its efforts to promote its unipolar status; on the other, it need not be too assertive in doing so. To err in either direction would risk prematurely curtailing its primacy. For many decades during the 20th century, the interests of the U.S. and the world community coincided well. In the 21st century, the U.S. similarly should be able to make its leadership welcomed by the world community. After all, the Soviet empire collapsed without a shot being fired by the U.S., Japan in recent years has been outdistanced without outright rivalry with the U.S., and European countries have been rendered impotent exactly when they became close allies of the U.S. In this sense, an adventure like the one in Iraq may be a useful and perhaps not too costly experiment.